

Connecting the Dots: Trump's Tightening Grip on Press Freedom

by [Rebecca Hamilton](#)

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A free press is a pillar of democracy, just as state-controlled media is a hallmark of autocracy. That is why monitoring actions that stifle the freedom of the press is a time-tested [means of tracking](#) the health of a democratic system. As journalists themselves scramble to keep up with the firehose of [executive orders](#) that President Donald Trump has issued since returning to power on Jan. 20, infringements on press freedom in the United States are reported piecemeal, making it hard to grasp the full extent of the threat now in play.

What follows is a compilation of actions that, taken individually and against the backdrop of a deluge of crises competing for airtime, may fall below the threshold of major alarm. These actions are diverse in source and scope, ranging from editorial decisions that in a different political moment might be of limited import, through to billion-dollar lawsuits and major regulatory actions targeting news media. Taken together though, these signs should be appreciated for what they are: a concerted push to align the U.S. information ecosystem with Trump's [entrenched](#) view that the independent media is "[truly the enemy of the people](#)," and that it must be replaced with information sources aligned with his personal views and under the control of himself and his allies. Going forward, it will be vital to start cataloguing these individual developments in relation to how they fit into, solidify or — one might hope eventually undermine, this bigger picture.

Canaries in the Coalmine: Self-Censorship

In the United States, the freedom of the press has been under pressure for some time, thanks to a set of political and economic factors that have increased the concentration of media ownership. (In 2023, Reporters Sans Frontiers [ranked the United States](#) at 45th in its global index of press freedom.) Even so, the run-up to the 2024 presidential election brought some newly [jarring moments](#), as Jeff Bezos and Patrick Soon-Shiong, billionaire

owners of the *Washington Post* and the *L.A. Times*, respectively, pulled their papers' editorial endorsements of Trump's opponent, Kamala Harris.

Since Trump won the election, more editorial flashpoints have arisen at both papers. In early January, for example, Pulitzer-Prize winning cartoonist [Ann Telnaes](#) resigned from her longstanding position at the *Washington Post* after her cartoon depicting Bezos and other tech billionaires prostrating themselves to Trump was quashed by the paper before publication. This week, a freelance contributor to the *L.A. Times* said his submission was changed [minutes before publication](#) to misrepresent his views on the danger of Trump's nominee, Robert F. Kennedy, Jr., to lead the Department of Health and Human Services.

None of these decisions reflect government censorship, but direct censorship is not the only way to undermine a free press. Indeed, creating an environment in which news media start to self-censor in deference to the views of those with State power is a less costly way to achieve the same outcome.

For the big picture: Pay attention to editorial flare-ups at media outlets; they can indicate that self-censorship is starting to take hold.

Making Independent Reporting Harder: Chilling Effects and Shrinking Space

Many journalists doing their jobs in the United States were [facing threats to their safety](#) before Trump's second term. But Trump embraces using the bully pulpit of the presidency to demean reporters. At this point, his [anti-press rhetoric](#) toward the media is well-known, but even in his personal interactions with reporters, Trump normalizes the idea that journalists who simply ask questions of him are valid targets of condemnation. (This recent exchange with a [CNN reporter](#) on AirForce One is one of many examples.)

Trump has also advanced [legally dubious claims](#) vindictively against any media outlet that provokes his ire. Before winning the 2024 election, Trump sued a [slew of publishers, broadcasters, and platforms](#) including [Meta](#), [ABC](#), [CBS](#), and the [Des Moines Register](#). Meta recently reached a [settlement agreement with Trump for \\$25 million](#), ABC [settled for \\$15 million](#), and CBS' parent company, Paramount, is reportedly [in settlement talks](#) this week (arguably with an eye to getting Trump's support for its proposed merger with Skydance media). The corporations that have settled with Trump have the funds to do so,

thereby saving themselves the time, retaliation risk, and litigation costs associated with fighting back as the Des Moines Register, for example, is doing. But the key here is that this is not about any individual lawsuit, but rather about the message sent to all publishers, broadcasters, and platforms: Risk crossing Trump at your peril.

The flipside of this equation is also in play: Align with Trump and you will be anointed with presidential largesse. This message began to crystallize with the photo of tech-billionaire platform and publishing owners Elon Musk (X), Mark Zuckerberg (Meta) and Jeff Bezos (*Washington Post*) in [prime position](#) at Trump's inauguration. A new example arose yesterday after Trump positioned right-wing media mogul Rupert Murdoch, and prospective TikTok buyer Larry Ellison (who, [if the Paramount-Skydance](#) merger proceeds, will control the resulting mega-corporation) with him [in the Oval Office](#) when journalists arrived to cover an unrelated topic. Trump's display of the rewards of currying his favor is best epitomized, though, with the unprecedented (and [unlawful](#)) powers that Musk is currently exercising through the so-called Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE, which despite its name is a White House office rather than a Cabinet-level department).

For the big picture: Pay attention to attacks on journalists, and lawsuits against publishers, broadcasters, and platforms; they indicate the expansion of a hostile media environment that diminishes the ability of the press to report freely. And pay attention to deals Trump makes with the owners of media companies and platforms; they shrink the space for independent reporting and information flows.

(Mis)-Using State Power: Reducing Public Access

State power can be used to expand or hamper public access to information and ideas. And this can take place at both the micro and macro level. Last week, the Department of Defense issued a memo [withdrawing](#) the longstanding access that *NBC News*, *Politico*, the *New York Times*, and *National Public Radio* had to office space inside the Pentagon, alongside other major news organizations. The onsite offices enable the journalists at these outlets to provide detailed coverage of fast-breaking national security issues that Americans need to understand, and aid transparency of government.

Following [critical reporting](#) about incoming Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth by the ousted outlets, the memo claimed the decision was made in the interests of fairly rotating the Pentagon office space among different news media. *One America News* (a [pro-Trump](#) cable network), *Breitbart News* (a key [disinformation node](#) in the pro-Trump information ecosystem), the *New York Post* (a Murdoch-owned conservative tabloid that [endorsed Trump](#) for president) and *HuffPost* (a left-leaning online paper) are now slated to come in as replacements. (The inclusion of the HuffPost seems to have been a last-minute nod to political balance, and a *HuffPost* spokesperson stated that the outlet had [not requested](#) office space.) Undoubtedly the ousted outlets will continue to cover national security news, and they will continue to have access to the Pentagon- but not with the kind of impromptu, immediate access to Defense Department personnel and, for *NBC News*, without the kind of studio space, however small it has been, that a television outlet needs. Bottom line: the memo was a reminder that State power can be used to pursue petty grievances against media outlets.

Another seemingly niche development came from the National Transportation Safety Board on Feb. 1, when it notified news media [via X](#) that it would be posting all updates about the recent domestic airplane crashes on X alone. With two major [plane crash investigations](#) underway simultaneously, there is a case to be made for the NTSB streamlining its communications in some way. However, that cannot explain or justify privileging X, a private platform owned and controlled by Musk, over any other platform.

The NTSB decision forces all journalists to use X to gain access to important updates in real time, and effectively turns X into the sole conduit for vital public information from an independent federal agency. Given the shuttering of an array of government [websites](#) in the two weeks since Trump returned to power, and the “[pauses](#)” his administration has imposed on public messaging from federal health agencies, this reduction in access to information, even on an issue-specific basis, raises concerns. (After publication, Eric Weiss, chief of media relations at the NTSB, reached out to reiterate that the updates on X alone were intended only for the two plane crashes. “We will continue to use all of our available platforms – website, email, and social media – to share investigative news with reporters and the public about the NTSB’s more than 1,200 active investigation cases,” he said “There has been no change to our communication policies and no outside interference into our processes and procedures.”)

Moving to the macro level, the new chair of the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), Brendan Carr, who [wrote the Project 2025 chapter](#) on the FCC, wasted no time using FCC power to pursue Trump's grievances. Just two days after Trump's inauguration, the FCC [reinstated](#) previously dismissed complaints against CBS, NBC, and ABC relating to Trump's claims of unfair pre-election coverage.

In his ongoing personal lawsuit, Trump accuses the CBS show "60 Minutes" of "partisan and unlawful acts of voter interference," claiming that its editing of its October 2024 interview with his presidential campaign opponent, then-Vice President Kamala Harris, was done to make her look good. Even with settlement discussions underway in that suit, the FCC demanded that CBS hand over the "[full, unedited transcript and camera feeds](#)" from the interview. The decision by CBS to comply with the demand sets a troubling precedent for media outlets that have generally declined such access. (Notably, the executive producer of 60 Minutes has said [he will refuse](#) to issue any apology for the edit.)

Consistent with Trump's [repeated calls](#) to remove the public broadcasting licenses of television and radio broadcasters whose coverage he dislikes, last week Trump's FCC also [launched an investigation](#) into *National Public Radio (NPR)* and the *Public Broadcasting Service (PBS)*. And earlier this week, Marjorie Taylor-Greene (R-Ga), in her role as chairperson of the new congressional subcommittee on "Delivering on Government Efficiency," which works closely with Musk's DOGE, requested that the [CEO of NPR testify](#) at a hearing on alleged bias in *NPR* reporting.

The Corporation for Public Broadcasting, under which both *PBS* and *NPR* fall, was [established by Congress](#) in 1967, in recognition of the public interest in public broadcasting. Today, public broadcasting reaches almost [99 percent](#) of the American public with free programming. Threatening the continued operation of public broadcasting is another sign of Trump's interest in bringing the information ecosystem further under his control.

For the big picture: Pay attention to the use of state power to curtail media operations; it indicates erosion of the public's ability to access information about government action.

Keeping the Big Picture in Sight

Freedom of the press means that journalists have the freedom to seek and receive information, media outlets have editorial independence, and the public has access to information, ideas, and opinions. Pressure on any one of these dimensions — on the ability of journalists to do their jobs without fear, on the ability of editors to exercise editorial discretion independently, on the ability of the public to freely access information and ideas — weakens the freedom of the press overall.

In a democracy, the public serves as the ultimate check on State power. Even — and especially — if Congress and the courts falter, the public can continue to push for accountability. Without a free press, though, the ability of the public to hold their government to account is vastly undermined. In the [words of the political advisor](#) to Hungary's autocratic prime minister, Viktor Orbán: “Whoever controls a country's media controls that country's mindset and through that the country itself.”

In a country like the United States, with a robust culture and practice of independent reporting, and constitutionally-guaranteed First Amendment protections, the move from a free press to State-controlled media (whether controlled directly by the State, or indirectly by cronies) does not — indeed cannot — happen overnight. Against this backdrop, any effort to undermine the free press unfolds in fits and starts, at different speeds, through different means, and on different issues. It paints a picture that can be hard to see at close range and in real time, until the image is complete, by which point it is too late.

Taken in isolation, no one action outlined above signals anything close to a death knell for the free press in this country. But if we only look at each incident in isolation, we risk missing the unmistakable thrust of what is unfolding: A wholesale effort by Trump and his allies to eviscerate the free press in order to construct an information ecosystem dominated and controlled by those who espouse his views.

IMAGE: U.S. President Donald Trump speaks to reporters in the Oval Office of the White House on February 03, 2025 in Washington, DC. (L-R) Trump was joined in the Oval Office by White House Staff Secretary Will Scharf; Howard Lutnick, his nominee for Commerce Secretary; former Executive Chairman of Fox Corp Rupert Murdoch; and Oracle co-founder, CTO and Executive Chairman Larry Ellison. (Photo by Anna MoneyMaker/Getty Images)

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